

ENDANGERING ENDANGERED AFRICAN LANGUAGES

Mamadou Niang

University of Missouri

Introduction

The number of African languages estimated at 2000 (Asher, 1994) has undergone an alarming decrease over the last twenty years. Some languages have already become extinct and many others are expected to follow suit in a very near future. According to Sommer (1991), 222 African languages are either extinct or threatened by extinction. In an attempt to remedy the situation, African governments and international organizations have adopted policies and strategies towards preserving and promoting endangered languages. Such attempts range from policies intended to promote national languages, the creation of Institutes of National Languages and Learning Centers, to the integration of National Languages into the educational and administrative systems. The critical evaluation of the language situation in Africa undertaken here provides a comprehensive analysis of the causes and the history underlying language extinction in Africa, assesses African language policies and their implementation and recommends strategies to remedy this alarming situation.

Causes

Kibrik (1991) and Dixon (1991) among others, identified numerous factors that contribute toward endangering languages. Some of the causes of language death identified by Brezinger (1992) relate to the exclusion of a particular language from education and political participation as well as economic deprivation. The causes of language death under consideration relate mainly to political and socio-economic factors. Political factors may relate to discrimination, oppression and unwise official language policies. The socio-economic factor may relate to limited economic opportunities and the lack of institutional support. Three motivations underlie the focus on these two factors. First, unlike other factors that may be difficult to control, many political and socio-economic factors that impact on language endangerment and language extinction in Africa can be prevented. Second, the focus on political and socio-economic factors is intended to highlight the problems associated with political and socio-economic decisions and in what respects such decisions have contributed to language endangerment and language extinction. The third motivation pertains to prevention and remedial purposes as it is hoped and anticipated that an awareness of the shortcomings associated with these decisions will lead African governments and international organizations to change and avoid policies likely to result in language endangerment or extinction. The causes of language endangerment and extinction associated with failures of African language policies can be assessed at levels pertaining to misguided language policies, political oppression, limited resources for national languages, lack of stimulus for growth, and the lack of coordination within and across national boundaries.

Language Policies

African language policies and international organizations have failed to protect African languages and prevent their extinction (Phillipson, 1994). In fact, African language policies and attitudes are, in many respects, responsible for the current alarming African language situation. Since African language policies are mainly responsible for the African endangered language situation, these language policies are assessed with reference to Cobbarubias' language policy trends, an assessment that highlights the negative ramifications of these policies. According to Cobbarubias (1983), language policies may attempt to kill a language, let a language die, create unsupported coexistence, provide partial support, give an official status to a language. Very few African languages enjoy the status of an official language. In the limited cases where an African language has been designated an official language, it is, in general, a co-official language, the other language being a colonial language. In this particular scenario, limited resources are allocated to the African co-official language left to compete with the colonial language. In a situation where African languages were neglected during the colonial period, in the absence of strong and sustained support, the African languages newly raised to the status of co-official languages will not be able to compete with the already established colonial languages which continue to enjoy both internal and external support. In many instances, the adoption of an African co-official language has not translated into attempts to develop the particular language. This failure to develop the African co-official language suppresses its viability to serve the functions of an official language. In this state of affairs, it is not surprising that only one African language has been able to completely replace a colonial language sub-Saharan Africa. African language policies, however, have been notorious in the first four trends suggested by Cobbarubias. Even though attempts to kill a language are rare, such trends continue to exist under the direction and support of African governments. The second, third, fourth and fifth trends tend to be more typical of African language policies.

The neglect of African languages by colonial powers during the colonial period, in general, continued after independence. Following their independence, most African countries continued colonial language policies. A number of reasons were invoked to justify the retaining of the colonial language among which one notes the "under-developed" state of African languages and thus their lack of "readiness" to carry certain functions in comparison to the colonial language perceived as a tool for economic growth. The neglect of "under-developed" languages will certainly not lead to a magic "development" of such languages. Another reason pertains to the so-called burden in developing African languages and African language materials. This burden is associated with the cost of language standardization, the development of materials and the training of teachers. Since such costs were in general not needed when a colonial language was adopted, in a context of scarce and limited resources, it may seem logical to preserve the official status of the colonial language (Turcotte, 1981). The maintenance of the colonial language also required important financial investments specially in the African context where a very limited number of individuals were educated in the colonial language during the colonial period. In addition, the maintenance of the colonial language, to this day, continues to benefit only a limited segment of the populations of the continent. Furthermore, the maintenance of colonial languages does not benefit African languages. The most commonly cited reason for retaining the colonial language as the official language relates to unity. Since the colonial language is not associated with any ethnic group, its adoption is said to prevent rivalries and dissensions that

arise when one particular African language is selected as the official language in a multilingual country. A major reason not generally mentioned relates to the African elite's interests and benefits in preserving the colonial language as an official language. Since formal education in the colonial language during colonization targeted only a few individuals, the status quo necessarily favors the elite educated in the colonial language.

The fallacy of the reasons invoked to maintain the status of the colonial language as an official language are, in the context of this analysis, less important than the ramifications of the decisions based on these reasons. In many instances, the language policies generally adopted seldom give priority to an African language to serve either as an official or a co-official language. In cases where an African language is selected as the official language, this choice tends to be at the expense of other national languages, a situation that has, in many instances, resulted in language endangerment and subsequent extinction. The promotion of languages such as Wolof, Swahili or Hausa illustrates this state of affairs. Brenzinger et al. (1991) refer to the case of a Bantu language Zamaro with 173,518 speakers in 1959 that is now spoken only by a handful of old individuals due to the spread of Swahili.

Political oppression

In addition to misguided language policies, political oppression continues to contribute towards language endangerment and extinction. In many instances, a particular language, through policies of discrimination and oppression, is imposed on other communities who are then forced by law to use the imposed language and relinquish their own native languages. In many instances, the imposed language is not even associated with numerical or geographical importance. Many situations may be found where even place names and personal names have been forcibly replaced by names from the dominant language. In extreme cases, the writing of certain languages is allowed only in a particular script. Sustained political oppression has resulted in the decline of many African languages, a trend that will ultimately lead to language extinction.

Lack of resources

The lack of insight in the formulation of adequate language policies is also reflected in the allocation of resources to the development or maintenance of African languages. Following the dictates of the adopted language policies, resources tend to be allocated to the official or prestige language. In most Arabophone, Lusophone, Francophone and Anglophone Africa, Arabic, Spanish, French and English are allocated most of the resources pertaining to learning and teaching materials as well as media coverage. Learning and teaching materials are generally written in the colonial language. Other languages given a prominent status may enjoy limited allocation of resources. In this particular case, however, only one or a limited number of languages are given secondary prominent status. The case of Wolof in Senegal is a good illustration of this phenomenon. Languages viewed as low priority languages are not allocated any financial or material support. Given the intricate connection between the availability of resources and the development of languages, most African languages are affected negatively by such policies.

Lack of stimulus for growth

In addition to neglect in the language policy and lack of resources, in most cases, no stimulus for growth is given to most national languages whose access to media is very limited. In the case of languages without a written tradition, very few incentives are provided for research and its documentation in these languages. In many instances, speakers of minority languages are compelled to move from certain locations because of the absence of incentives on the part of African governments to create conditions likely to maintain the majority of these populations in their traditional bases. The movement to other geographical locations where these immigrants become a linguistic minority adopting the language of the dominant group or the official language, results, in the long run, in language loss and subsequently in language extinction.

The formulation and application of African language policies have not only failed to protect African languages but also led to language endangerment and extinction. The failures of such language policies coupled with both internal and external pressure led some African countries to declare their resolution to develop and promote national languages. Such endeavors were to be achieved by the adoption of a number of strategies relating to the creation of institutes of national languages and the integration of national languages into the education and /or administration systems.

Renewed policies

In these new policies, the first step toward the promotion of national languages was to create institutes of national languages which conduct research and develop learning and teaching materials for the teaching of national languages. Unfortunately, after their creation, most institutes of national languages were not allocated resources necessary for the development of materials. The absence of resources after the creation of such centers has seriously hampered the very purposes and aims of these institutes. Due to the absence of resources, very few professionals are hired to develop learning and teaching materials. Even though several institutes of national languages were created, very little coordination exists between these African institutes. In the face of limited resources and common goals, it seems ironic that close coordination among these institutes is limited or absent. The second phase in the promotion of national languages was to integrate such languages into the education and administration systems. The teaching of languages in schools as a most appropriate way of preserving languages is prevalent in the literature on language extinction (Kibrik, 1991). When not used as official languages or media of instruction, many languages can be taught as a subject, strategies that have been implemented in other settings. In the African context, the implementation of such strategies in a wide scale is very rare. In general, the integration of African languages into the education system is limited to the level of experimental classes. Furthermore, given the low prestige associated with African languages, there is little incentive for African students to register for African language classes. The absence of resources for the development of these languages at the level of the institutes of national languages is also observed at the level of integration into the education systems. Except in the case of Arabic, Swahili and Somali which have enjoyed large scale integration into the administration systems (Webb, 1944), in many African countries, the colonial language continues to fulfill the role of language of administration. The failure to have developed such languages, the failure to develop research and teaching materials make it difficult to integrate such languages into the administration and education systems. Such failures have

resulted in the tendency to fall back onto the adoption or maintenance of the colonial language. Furthermore, in these "new" language policy orientations, in most cases, the colonial language is retained as the only official language or a co-official language. Only in limited cases did an African language acquire the status of an official language. In all instances, the adopted policies did not target all African languages. Only certain languages deemed important following various types of criteria were targeted by such renewed policies as resources are said to be deficient to promote all national languages. Languages perceived as low priority languages continue to undergo neglect.

Consequences of such policies

Except in limited cases, both previous and "new" language policies have been inadequate in the protection and development of African languages. Such inadequate language policies have led to an alarming situation. According to Vossen (1987), of the 150 Khoisan languages spoken 140 years ago, over 100 languages have already become extinct. Sommer (1989) indicates that 47 languages have become extinct, 66 are either extinct or in the process of extinction, 44 are in a process of extinction, 12 are in a process of extinction or threatened by extinction, 53 are threatened by extinction. In the absence of written records and comprehensive surveys based on objective criteria relating among other factors to the rapid and important decline in the number of speakers of certain languages, it is particularly difficult to ascertain the validity of such figures. The accuracy of such figures is, in the context of the African endangered language situation, less important than the fact that many African languages are threatened by extinction, an alarming situation that requires drastic and urgent action to not only stop this trend but also reverse the current situation.

Recommendations

The current and previous language policies have failed to protect African languages and prevent language extinction in Africa. Except in very few instances, such policies have also failed to develop and promote the majority of African languages. The rate of language loss and language extinction is high enough for the current status-quo to be maintained. In this regard, such language policies must be changed, articulated and applied in a manner that not only prevents additional language extinction but also develops and promotes all African languages. The change in African language policy being advocated must involve a change in the philosophy and orientation of such policies. It should target all African languages instead of focusing on one or a very limited number of languages. Such language policies must prioritize the revitalization of languages threatened by extinction and must take an aggressive policy towards the documentation and preservation of data on extinct languages. It is certainly unrealistic to elevate all languages to the level of official languages specially in countries where hundreds and hundreds of languages are involved. However, the decision to promote a particular language must not lead to the deliberate neglect of other languages. Given the fact that few endangered languages have been adequately documented and given our inadequate awareness of the true picture of the African endangered language situation, it seems necessary to conduct a thorough and comprehensive assessment of the situation. This assessment should be conducted in every country with the assistance of international organizations. Following this assessment, an aggressive policy should be undertaken at all levels to protect and revitalize endangered languages and prevent others from being endangered and extinct. Continued pressure from

interest groups such as the Committee on Endangered Languages of the Modern Languages Association and international organizations such as the UN, UNESCO and the Council of Europe must be applied on African governments for the implementation of such needed changes. Minority communities must be protected within and outside their local bases because the protection and preservation of minority languages correlates with the protection of communities that speak such languages. The protection of such minority communities may prevent their massive migration to areas where members of these minority communities are forced in a situation whereby they will ultimately lose their languages.

Conclusion

The current state of the African language extinction situation is alarming and unacceptable. The analysis of the situation shows that misguided language policies, discrimination and neglect have been largely responsible for the current trend which is likely to continue unless drastic measures are undertaken to remedy the situation. An assessment of the current situation to determine accurately the extent of language endangerment and extinction in Africa, a change in the language policies, the implementation of an aggressive language maintenance and revitalization policy and the application of external pressure from international organizations will certainly help improve the state of the African language endangerment and extinction situation.

REFERENCES

- Asher, R. E. 1994 (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*. Pergamon Press, New York.
- Calvet, L. J. 1987. *La Guerre des Langues et les Politiques Linguistiques*. Payot, Paris.
- Cobarrubias, J. 1983. *Ethical Issues in Status Planning*. In Cobarrubias, J. Fishman, J. A. (Eds) *Progress in Language Planning: International Perspectives*. Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin.
- Dixon, R. M. W. 1991. *The Endangered Languages of Australia, Indonesia and Oceania*. In R. H. Robins and E. M. Uhlenbeck (eds), *Endangered Languages*. Berg, New York.
- Kibrik, Aleksandr E. 1991. *The Problem of Endangered Languages in the USSR*. In R. H. Robins and E. M. Uhlenbeck (eds), *Endangered Languages*. Berg, New York.
- Phillipson, R. and T. Skuttnab-Kangas. 1994. "Linguicide". In R. E. Asher (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*. Pergamon Press, New York.
- Turcotte, Denis. 1981. *La Politique Linguistique en Afrique Francophone*. Les Presses de l'Université Laval.
- Vossen, Rainer. 1987. *Am Anfang Steht der Schnalz, Forschung-Mitteilungen der DFG3*.
- Webb, Vic. 1994. *Revalorizing the Autochthonous Languages of Africa*. In Martin Putz (ed.) *Language Contact Language Conflict*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, Philadelphia.